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Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.), the ranking member of the House Transportation Committee, is working to reverse a controversial change to the 2005 highway bill that was made after Congress cleared the measure but before it was signed by the president.

After the \$286.4 billion bill passed Congress, someone, presumably the enrollment clerk, changed the language of a \$10 million provision for Florida's Lee County. The altered language designated the money for a "Coconut Road Interchange" on Interstate 75, whereas the original language authorized the money for "widening and improvements" for I-75.

Watchdog groups accuse Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), who chaired the Transportation panel at the time and shepherded the bill through the House, of making the change to benefit a number of Florida developers. One of those is David Aronoff, who helped raise \$40,000 for Young at a February 2005 fundraiser. Aronoff owns 4,000 acres adjacent to Coconut Road, including 1,200 acres directly east of the proposed interchange.

The Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) never wanted the money for the Coconut Road Interchange. Last week, the MPO voted for a second time to send the money back to Congress in the hope that it would be reallocated for the road-widening project.

Also last week, Taxpayers for Common Sense sent a letter to the ethics committee asking for an investigation into the improper manipulation of the legislative process, calling the matter an "extraordinary case of the integrity of the U.S. House of Representatives being undermined." It was the first time the non-partisan watchdog has called on the ethics panel to launch a member probe.

Mica is responding to a request by Rep. Connie Mack (R-Fla.), who represents Lee County and

asked for help in trying to get the change reversed. He also said Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.), the chairman of the Transportation panel, is assisting in the effort.

Mica sent a letter on Oct. 1 to Mack, obtained by The Hill, in which he promised to ensure that the change would be made.

"I support your request and pledge to work alongside Chairman Jim Oberstar to ensure these funds are denoted for 'Widening and Improvements for I-75 in Lee and Collier County, Florida' as it was originally identified when Congress passed the 2005 [highway bill] on July 29, 2005."

Oberstar's office did not return a call for comment.

Young's spokeswoman, Meredith Kinny, would not comment on whether Young or his staffers requested the Coconut Road Interchange change to the earmark language.

She did say that "when that language was first inserted in the bill," Young was responding to a need expressed by Florida Gulf Coast University and "area residents" for a "hurricane evacuation route."

"If they no longer see a need for that evacuation route, then that is well within their right," she said.

In an interview, Mica said he hadn't discussed the matter with Young.

"My position has always been to support the member whose district is affected," he said.

He also said he was so concerned about how the earmark was inserted that he asked his entire Transportation Committee staff whether any of them had anything to do it.

“If they had, I would have fired them,” Mica remarked, noting that none were involved.

Many of the aides had remained on the committee after Young stepped down as chairman when Democrats assumed the majority in January.

“We’re very pleased and appreciative that Mr. Mica is supporting the effort to restore these monies to the overall widening of I-75,” Mack’s spokesman said.

Mica said he would try to work with his Senate counterparts to make the fix in the technical corrections measure for the 2005 transportation bill, which is making its way through Congress this fall. The House already passed its versions of the bill in August, but the Senate is still working on moving its version, which will have to be reconciled with the House’s in conference committee.

This is the second time Republicans have leaned on Young to make major changes to an earmark he requested. In late 2005, as the result of pressure from the public and his own party and negative press attention, Young and Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) agreed to release the obligation that Alaska use the \$315 million earmarked in the transportation bill for the so-called “Bridge to Nowhere,” officially called the Gravina Access Project, and another known as “Don Young’s Way” (formerly called Knik Arm Bridge).

The state of Alaska still received the money, and last month as Stevens and Young faced FBI investigations in a separate matter, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin announced that she would

abandon efforts to build the Gravina Access Project.

The controversy over Young's earmark comes at an awkward time for Republicans, who have launched a discharge petition effort aimed at forcing a vote on legislation to ensure all taxpayer-funded earmarks are publicly disclosed and subject to debate on the House floor. House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) and other GOP leaders will hold a press conference on the petition Thursday.

Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), a vocal critic of the earmark process, said the change to the earmark language after it passed the House and Senate "looks terrible."

"That absolutely should not happen," he said.

Campbell said if the ethics committee investigates the matter, there are a number of Democratic earmarks they should also review.

Either way, he said, he believes members shouldn't request an earmark outside their state.